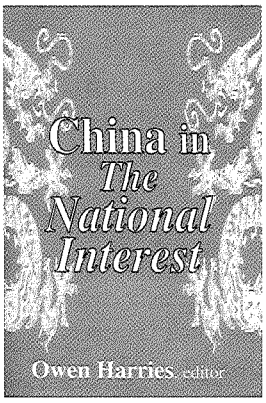
Living with the Dragon



Owen Harries (ed)
China in The National Interest

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Reviewed by Stuart Harris

The history of the world's coming to terms with China is long, complex and often troubled. The United States has its own long history of substantial relations with China that has reflected particular complexity—its 19th century 'open door' trade policy, its long missionary experience and its belief in its own exceptionalism, among many other things contributing to considerable volatility in the relationship. The United States has swung periodically from romanticising China to demonising it, China's more recent role as a domestic plaything for US politicians being made easier by the 1989 Tiananmen Square tragedy.

Australia's shorter and not especially deep involvement with China is now one area where Australia's close association with the United States has so far not hindered significantly an ability to pursue a largely independent and constructive policy. The basis of that policy, however, remains diplomatic and commercial even if, relatedly, it is also basically optimistic. Ultimately, how far Australia's overall pragmatism and optimism can be maintained depends very much on how the United States comes to terms with China's emergence as a more powerful state. Given China's crucial importance for Australia and for its regional economic and strategic environment, it is essential that Australian policymakers should understand what drives US-China relations. This volume will help substantially in that understanding.

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The emergence of China as a great power inevitably poses a considerable challenge for the United States. China's potential for changing much of the way that the US has thought about the world and the US place in it is accepted by some in the US and feared by many. Consequently, in the US debate, politicians, officials, media personalities, think tanks and much of the public swing between ideology, political expediency, resentment and fear on the one hand and pragmatism, economic opportunism, tolerance and hope on the other—as well as frequent bemusement and befuddlement. In that debate, bias, misinformation and prejudice often replace balance, understanding and objectivity.

The US debate on China tends easily to polarity. Those claiming intellectual leadership of what is a wide anti-China coalition of divergent interest groups often see themselves as a 'blue' team opposed to the 'red' team of those 'soft on China' who commonly argue that treating China as an enemy will likely make it one. The opponents of China—whom Harries aptly terms 'grazing pundits'—tend to be critical of existing policies, pontificating in their op-eds with little background or understanding. They tend to see China's regime as menacing, and argue about what they view as the latest China wrongdoing or latest anti-American action.

China of course does do many things wrong and its human rights record, although improving, remains woeful. As Robert Ross and other contributors to this volume make clear, however, many things China is accused of are not true and where there is some truth at least part of the problem is that its actions are not judged against what other countries do or how they reflect a reasonable national interest response to external pressures. Thus, that the Chinese also operate according to their national interest is at times seen as reprehensible—even though such a policy base has become respectable elsewhere.

Understanding where China has been does help in understanding its fluctuating interactions with and attitudes towards the world and the US as well as where it may go in the future. Several articles in this volume on China's history, culture and society—such as on Asian values, capitalism and Confucianism, Asia's demographic trends and China's quest for dignity, for example—therefore make an important contribution. They also provide a sounder perspective for answering questions about China continually asked in the US and elsewhere. These include: can China be brought within the international community of nations or will it, as it gets stronger, become arrogant and domineering internationally, as great powers, including the US, are wont to do, and be in turn a threat to the US? Should China be helped and encouraged or be blocked in its tracks before it gets too strong for that? Will China disintegrate and in the process look for external adventures to distract domestic attention or will it remain stable, continuing to grow economically while transforming politically?

The particular value of this volume is that, in dealing with such questions, it illustrates the diversity of views within the US on what the US response to China should be and how it sees those questions being answered—while telling us much about the US itself. Indeed Bruce Cumings in his contribution argues that, to Americans, China can be seen as a metaphor, reflecting a wide range of disparate impressions of what China means, rather than as a nation. Yet there is a considerable depth of scholarship and knowledge of China in the US and in 28 chapters plus the editor's introduction, this volume brings together the thoughts of 30 mostly American leading analysts with policy experience or scholarly interests in China. Their contributions to *The National Interest* were made between 1995 and 2002 under the remarkable editorship of an Australian, Owen Harries. A short review must necessarily be selective but they all reflect that fact that the Harries period as editor was marked not only by the high quality of the writing in the journal itself, but also, for a journal with a conscious conservative bent, by a wide range of opinion, much of it sharply critical of some of the more conservative US thinking on China.

Only two of the articles were written after 9/11 but much of the underlying structure of US-China relationship remains largely unaffected. Some issues in the relationship, notably the North Korean situation, have increased in importance while we are still working out the full implications of the new US National Security Strategy. An

example of how things have changed is reflected in Charles Horner's chapter, putting China's now salient, largely Muslim, Xinjiang into context. US concerns not that long ago about human rights in Xinjiang are now directed more to terrorism and Uighur links to Islamic extremism. Again, before 9/11 Tom Christensen and Richard Betts could argue that the principal issue facing US foreign policy was China. Now the question is did 9/11 change that or have things basically stayed the same? Or has it, as David Lampton argues, imposed a discipline on the US political system that has not existed since the Tiananmen bloodshed of 1989?

Certainly, global terrorism has replaced a rising China as the main current US security threat and China has taken advantage of this to strengthen the bilateral relationship and to engage in a limited degree of security cooperation. Given that there are important constituencies in both countries that remain sceptical about the other's long term intentions and how much of a threat each poses to the other, is this just a transient strategic pause? Will China in due course again provide the prime focus for US foreign policy? That both countries will continue to run a hedging strategy just in case makes the issue somewhat moot. Undoubtedly, US interest groups and bandwagoning politicians will continue to find China a useful successor to Japan as an enemy, or at least as a culprit, illustrated currently by calls from some US business interests for a revaluation of the Chinese currency that fall only a little short of the 'freedom fries' episode for political superficiality.

So far as the issue of China's integration into the international community is concerned, this is already a done deal and not just as a result of China's accession to the World Trade Organisation (WTO). Isolating and marginalising China is certainly not now, if it ever was, a US option. And, contrary to assertions of aggressively expansionist ambitions, Harries notes in his introduction that in recent decades China has been singularly unambitious beyond its region and even within its region its assertiveness has been modest. Moreover, its adherence to international norms is no patchier than most other countries. Indeed, Zbigniew Brezinski notes that over the longer term, China's international behaviour may have been no worse and perhaps even better than the more benevolently regarded India.

Yet the US continues to have difficulty with the 'China threat', conflated as it is with a rising China. So there has been extensive analysis and debate about whether to engage or to contain China, with various imaginative terms being invented for something in the middle. The containers want the US to reverse or slow China's rise. Less attention has been given to what is meant by containment—what do the containers want China to do and look like? A view continues to exist in some quarters that a US conflict with China is ultimately inevitable, if only over Taiwan, and others continue to seek policies to undermine what they consider as China's despotic governing regime. Yet even many of the more strident critics of US policy accept that engagement is unavoidable.

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Much of the debate is, not unreasonably, about China as a military threat and the discussion frequently reflects a divergence of views between defence strategists and political scientists. The US has traditionally believed that all problems have solutions—usually military ones. China does not. It defers the too difficult ones and does not put the same weight on military solutions. This is perhaps inevitable given its much weaker military capability but China's history also gives some support for the view that it approaches problems differently.

What is China's worldview now? In economics we know that it changed greatly from a variable but basically inward looking largely Marxist approach to a Chinese market oriented system with capitalist characteristics. It also seemed in recent years to have understood and accepted—without greatly challenging—the

inevitable political dominance of the US for the foreseeable future, recognising the importance for China's domestic development of stable international relations generally and, above all, with the US.

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Moreover, now, compared with the US and with the exception of Taiwan, China is rather more the status quo country and the US the dissatisfied one, although the contributions in this volume reflect conflicting judgments. What is seen as important differs. Several of the articles reflect the reality that China, although as a military power is still more important regionally than globally, will be central to the future shape of the global as well as regional international order where military power is not the only source of influence. Several contributors deal with China in the broader context of Asia in particular. And this is reflected in part in different views as to the strategic problem. Is the concern China's capacity to threaten the US as such, which Bates Gill and Michael O'Hanlon regard as very limited now and into the prospective future, or is it as James Lilley and Carl Ford and others argue, a more significant ability to challenge key US allies in the Asia-Pacific?

Again, what will be the path of Chinese politics in the face of the inevitable stresses and strains of compressing an unprecedented industrial revolution into, by historical standards, a very short time span? China faces a wide range of problems in the economic and social field as David Zweig notes. These include unemployment, banking sector debts, inefficient state-owned enterprises and corruption in particular. China's economic performance has so far been affected less than some contributors have seen as likely, in part because their views often reflect the adverse influence of the Asian financial crisis of the late 1990s. Moreover, the expected difficulties of absorbing the social and political, as well as economic, impacts of WTO entry seem to have been largely avoided to date.

How far will issues of economic change, domestic discontent, or emerging nationalism, lead to, or provide barriers to, democratic change? Many US analysts fear that China will fail to control domestic turbulence and in desperate response will turn to a more nationalistic—and hence aggressive—foreign policy. Undoubtedly, there is already pressure for political reform in China, not due simply to frustrated expectations but in part due to the requirements of an increasingly marketised economy. As George Walden reminds us, however, in a review article included here of Andrew Nathan's and Perry Link's edited volume *The Tiananmen Papers*, moves towards greater freedom once begun are difficult to control, as 1989 demonstrated.

Economic growth has certainly been accompanied by improvements in China's human rights and, in general, rising income levels do tend to be linked to increasing democratisation. The regime has shown sufficient seriousness and flexibility to suggest its continued stability and it has overcome the succession challenges that Bruce Dickson discusses. Average income levels are likely to continue to rise in China and Henry Rowan argues that economic growth has already led in China to a degree of political evolution in terms of village elections, advances towards the rule of law, and a more active and less controllable media. Ultimately he sees this evolving into a kind of democratic society. Other contributors put greater weight on political reforms emerging from the need for the regime to be more responsive to those adversely affected by economic reform. Or they doubt a clear link in China between economic development and serious political reform, but like David Zweig, believe that this should not deflect the US from its economic engagement policy.

Where US policy might go in the future is perhaps given some guidance from contributions by Paul Wolfowitz and Robert Zoellick, both now senior officials in the Bush Administration. Both were written, like most of the articles, before Bush took office. Wolfowitz supports engagement and, for Taiwan, the 'One China' policy, insisting on a 'peaceful resolution' of the Taiwan issue. In decrying the deliberate and longstanding ambiguity over the US commitment to Taiwan, however, he is ambiguous himself in

that he also criticises the belief of many Taiwanese that US support is unconditional.

Similarly, Zoellick directs attention more to economic engagement, supporting such engagement but wanting a more integrated although imprecisely defined approach to managing inevitable relationship problems. These are relatively moderate views but there are other, harsher, Administration views, notably in the Department of Defense. Its concerns at China's rise and what it regards as China's growing military capacity to threaten US security interests in the Asia-Pacific region have been articulated in its various US strategy reports. In consequence, efforts are being made to build up US defence capabilities and to strengthen regional military alliance relationships. In this it gives little weight to the view, with its obvious consequences, that China's defence planning may be less autonomously determined than responsive to what US defence planners are doing, and not just in respect of Taiwan.

The Taiwan Strait is, for most contributors, the most problematic issue in the US-China relationship and the military has clearly in mind the Taiwan Strait as a potential area of conflict. This is, as Christensen and Betts make clear, undoubtedly a complex—and potentially dangerous—issue in US-China relations and one where domestic politics in all three entities are significant. It also poses critical questions for US policy. Militarily, in the event of a crisis, these include how to manage the crisis both to prevent any unwanted escalation and, unlike with Iraq, to plan for an exit strategy. This has currently an increased salience, with Taiwan's President Chen already increasing cross-strait tension with provocative statements.

Politically, the Bush Administration's early position on Taiwan was unnecessarily confrontational, as Robert Ross indicates in the second of his two contributions. Since then, the US political approach has moved back closer to the careful navigation undertaken by the Clinton Administration between an unconditional assurance to Taiwan's security and discouragement of any Chinese thought of coercive reunification, deterring both China and Taiwan and developing its mutual interests with China. There was significant domestic US support for Lee Teng-hui's 1999 reference to Taiwan's 'special state to state' relationship with China, effectively abandoning the 'one China' policy. The danger, as Owen Harries noted in a contribution he made to *The National Interest,* the one sad omission from this volume, is that close military and other ties with Taiwan could lead to Taiwan, by its unilateral actions, effectively determining whether the US should go to war with another major power.

This has obvious and analogous lessons for Australia. Although the cross-strait situation has been relatively quiescent for a while, the US is currently preoccupied elsewhere and President Chen, with a presidential election due in 2004, appears to be taking advantage of that lack of attention to China-Taiwan relations. For Australia, US Taiwan policy is particularly critical, given US expectations of Australian support for any conflict it may have with China over Taiwan. It also illustrates the problems of a security dynamic reflected in arms transfers and security links that are only partially tied to broader US political and strategic interests and approaches and even less so to Australia's national interests.

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Robert Ross also points to where US positions could put Australia in difficulties elsewhere. When he identifies the US conceit that what is wrong for all others is alright for the US because of the purity of its motives, this not only puts US credibility in question, as he observes, but also the credibility of those too close in automatic support.

This volume is not only a worthy tribute to Owen Harries' editing of *The National Interest,* although it is that. It is also valuable as a source to help Australians better to understand potential developments—favourable and unfavourable—in the complex US-China relationship and the nature and motivations of the contests over policies that may have critical impacts on Australia's future.